

BEDFORD CHORAL SOCIETY

Willcocks, Handel and Haydn - June 13th 2009

By the time you get this, the concert of June 13th will be a distant memory. I approached this musical sandwich, confident about the two slices of bread, but just a little apprehensive about the filling. I recall, somewhat indistinctly. I must admit, the 1986 performance of Jonathan Willcock's 'Riddle of the World'. I remember wrestling with the problems of pitch in the whole-tone scale passages, some very unusual rhythmic challenges and a stronger-than-ever need to watch the conductor competing with the urge to have one's eyes for ever going back to the score, where nothing could be taken for granted. For all that, I felt it was a rewarding challenge.

Twenty-three years later, I cannot honestly say that I recalled much of it, even after an hour with a borrowed score. It would be presumptuous of me to award marks for accuracy, but what I saw and heard from the choir was vigour, commitment and conviction. (Incidentally, I counted approximately 84 singers, surely the smallest choir I recall, even for the summer concert, which was always down a bit.)

The Handel organ Concerto was a sheer delight as the *hors d'oeuvre*. The small orchestra and the exquisite modern chamber pipe organ were much as Handel would have had (apart from the "period" instruments), and Tim's execution was, as ever, immaculate. The Harmoniemesse, not sung by BCS since 1984, gave the choir a reassuring return to a more familiar diatonic world and the performance was very enjoyable. The Haydn idiom may be a familiar one, but he had a great penchant for the unexpected. Once again, the choir was complemented by very fine soloists in both works.

Finally, I should like to recall an incident leading up to the 1986 performance. The programme was very similar to the 2009 one in that there was a short Handel work to start with, (O Praise the Lord with one consent), then the 'Riddle of the World' and finally Beethoven Mass in C. Sir David (Willcocks) was the conductor except for The Riddle, which of course was conducted by his son.

At the Monday rehearsal just before the performance, DVW came and conducted while Andrew Morris (our choirmaster then), was at the piano. After the Handel we embarked on Jonathan's piece. The piano reduction is fiendishly difficult in places and after a while DVW took over at the piano and Andrew took the baton, though David effectively "drove" from the piano.

But that was not all: at the Saturday rehearsal, we did the Handel anthem, then Jonathan took over for his piece; he took rather long than was planned and when DVW got back on the podium for the Beethoven Mass, he had appreciably less time than he had wanted; he was not best pleased. I had a word with him as the rehearsal broke up; he was clearly unhappy and said that the programme was too long. As I was currently chairman of the programme-planning sub-committee, I felt very embarrassed, since I had been closely involved in the choices. Ah well!

Ken Laflin

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